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THE PERCEPTION OF THE CONCEPT OF COMMUNICATION BETWEEN TEACHER AND STUDENT IN VETERINARY EDUCATION

PERCEPȚIA CONCEPTULUI DE COMUNICARE DINTRE CADRUL DIDACTIC ȘI STUDENT ÎN EDUCAȚIA VETERINARĂ

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ABSTRACT

Communication is acknowledged as an important factor in practicing veterinary medicine and is part of the "Day One Skills" of a graduate. OIE (The World Organisation for Animal Health) and other organisations responsible for generating global education policies, recommend that communication courses are integrated within the curricula of veterinary medicine faculties. Additionally, effective communication between teachers and students is an essential factor in the achievement of a high quality veterinary medical education.

In order to gather primary information about how communication is perceived in the community of teachers and students from the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, University of Agronomic Sciences and Veterinary Medicine of Bucharest, Romania, a paper questionnaire with open questions was administered to 159 participants: 135 students and 24 teachers.

Communication in the teacher-student relationship was rated as very important by 100% of the teachers and by 88% of the students. However, communication between teachers and students was considered poor by 18% of the respondents, the degree of dissatisfaction increasing as students approach the end of their studies. Our study highlights the need for communication training of all those involved in the teaching-learning process and a greater awareness of the role that communication plays in the process of teaching, to ensure students develop the knowledge, skills and abilities required of a veterinary graduate. Using the questionnaire proved to be a simple and quick tool to capture the perception of the concept of communication between the teachers and the students. The data revealed a need to unify the notions of communication and to develop the communication skills both among students and teachers.

Keywords: *communication, teacher - student relationship, day-one-competencies*

REZUMAT

Comunicarea este un factor cheie în practicarea profesiei de medic veterinar și în consecință este regăsită în lista abilităților de „Ziua întâi” a proaspătului absolvent. Organizația Mondială pentru

Sănătatea Animală (OIE) și alte organizații responsabile de politicile educaționale, recomandă introducerea cursurilor de comunicare în curricula facultăților de medicină veterinară. Pe de altă parte, comunicarea este un element esențial în asigurarea unui învățământ medical veterinar de calitate.

Pentru a obține informații primare referitoare la percepția cadrelor didactice și a studenților față de conceptul de comunicare în cadrul Facultății de Medicină Veterinară, Universitatea de Științe Agronomice și Medicină Veterinară din București, s-a întocmit un chestionar cât mai simplu, cu întrebări deschise, care să permită respondenților să-și exprime liber punctele de vedere. Acesta a fost aplicat unui număr de 159 de respondenți: 135 studenți și 24 cadre didactice.

Comunicarea din cadrul relației cadru didactic – student a fost apreciată ca fiind foarte importantă de către 100% dintre cadrele didactice și de către 88% dintre studenți. Comunicarea este considerată deficitară de către 18% dintre respondenți, gradul de nemulțumire accentuându-se odată cu trecerea în anii mai mari de studiu. Răspunsurile primite subliniază nevoia de instruire în domeniul comunicării al tuturor participanților la procesul de predare-învățare și de conștientizare a importanței comunicării în formarea competențelor și abilităților absolvenților veterinari. Utilizarea chestionarului s-a dovedit a fi o metodă simplă și rapidă pentru a surprinde percepția despre conceptul de comunicare dintre cadrul didactic și studenți. Din răspunsurile analizate se simte nevoia uniformizării noțiunilor de comunicare și dezvoltarea abilităților de comunicare atât în rândul studenților cât și în rândul cadrelor didactice.

Cuvinte cheie: *abilitati de comunicare, relația cadru didactic – student, „competențele de ziua întâi”*

The world cannot be imagined without communication, regardless of the level of organization of the matter, animal, plant or mineral. Communication is essential for life and is the key to many answers to yet unspoken questions. Pragmatically, communication is to make known, to transmit something to someone, to exchange information, it is a process by which information is transmitted between individuals through a system of symbols, signs and behaviors (19, 20, 21).

Language is an essential part of human communication. It can be viewed as a system of labels assigned to every element, from thoughts, objects, phenomena, beings and plants, which can be grouped into categories by cognition, thus determining the conceptual understanding of the words we use in our lives (17).

From the very beginning, the concept of communication by language must be established as a system for transmitting a message encoded in a comprehensible manner, from an addresser to an addressee on a communication channel accessible to both parties (8). The effectiveness of communication depends on the language and transmission method chosen by the addresser, the addressee's ability to understand the information and can be measured by feedback. The feedback as a mechanism involves another message, transmitted backwards from the addressee to the addresser, the roles being reversed in order to clarify to the addresser the accuracy of the comprehension of the transmitted message (13). We can conclude that a person who wants to deliver a message, after choosing the words best describing the concepts involved, needs to make them as simple and clear as possible, which will easily reach the recipient. This will ensure that the transmitted message was received and understood by the addressee and if the message could be

decoded. For even greater communication effectiveness, the addresser can ensure that there is similarity between the concepts that both parties are familiar with (13).

Knowledge cannot be conceived without the existence of a successful act of communication, without understanding the message at all levels (logical, paraverbal and nonverbal). Knowledge, regardless of level, is the ultimate goal of life in all aspects, and communication is the instrument in its realization (8, 10).

Why did we choose **communication** as an object of this study?

There can be many answers. The simplest one would be: because there is a need for the development of communication skills, because there is international pressure acting on teachers and especially on our graduates in terms of training and effective application of different types of communication (9, 12, 16). Worldwide, there is increased interest from teachers and students in being trained in the field of applied communication in veterinary medicine (4, 6, 11, 16). Undoubtedly, communication is indispensable to the teaching-learning process and is a necessary skill for future veterinarians, which should be developed during the six years of college study and refined after graduation. Communication is recognized as an important factor in practicing the profession and is part of the "Day One Skills" of a veterinary medicine graduate. It is one of the main factors that ensure success in business and the development of a veterinarian's career (9, 22).

Communication in veterinary medicine is important to European and world organizations responsible for regulating the veterinary profession. The introduction of communication courses in the curriculum of the veterinary medical faculties started many years ago in the US and Canada (1980s) and since 2000 communication in veterinary education has been increasing rapidly all over the world. Since 2002, *Train the Trainer* courses in communication skills have been organised for both students and teaching staff in the United States, Canada, Australia and UK (7, 16, 18). How else could the graduates have communication skills if they are not trained as students and how can they be trained if the coaches / teachers do not know the basics of modern communication? How can the graduates communicate effectively with animal owners, the public, other colleagues and the veterinary authorities if the appropriate communication methods are not applied in the teaching and learning process? Other studies have discussed communication from the pedagogical point of view in higher education (2).

Today there are several scientific meetings dedicated to communication in medical education and/or veterinary medicine: Conferences organized by the OIE, the International Conference on Communication in Veterinary Medicine (ICCV), Association for Medical Education in Europe (AMEE). There are recent articles that specifically consider communication between teacher and student (1, 2, 5, 15), which also encouraged us to further develop of our research activities in this direction.

In veterinary medicine, the most complex issue is represented by the efficiency of communication between the different categories of persons/entities, with different motivations, different skills and competences, with a different psychology, in a growing cultural heterogeneity.

The aim of the present paper is to raise awareness of the need to introduce more communication courses for veterinary students in Romania and for lifelong training of the teachers to improve the communication methods, both being essential to the higher quality of the education system.

We approach the communication methods upgrade, transpassing the communication obstacles between students and teachers. The IT boom led to huge gaps between generations and in the specific area of higher education this can be a source of unsuccessful communication and thus, impact the performance of students.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A survey was designed by the research team to investigate communication as applied to students and teachers. In order to obtain primary information, which is indicative of how communication is generally perceived in the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, we chose a simple questionnaire with open questions and free text responses that allowed subjects to express their views freely. Likert scale was not used as a method of assessment, because our aim was to obtain basic information and not to implement a concept with qualitative answers.

The data were collected using paper questionnaires, which the respondents completed under the protection of anonymity, in order to obtain the most sincere answers that are relevant to the current situation and the level of understanding of the concept of "communication".

The questionnaires were administered in person (a teacher distributed the questionnaire to each group of students at the end of a lecture, and a student distributed the questionnaire to the teachers). The questionnaire was completed by 159 participants (52 students in the first year, 44 students in the third year, 39 students in the sixth year and 24 teachers: 10 under 45 year old and 14 over 45 year old).

The data analysis was undertaken by two researchers who grouped the responses for each question into categories that were also discussed with a third member of the team.

This paper received ethical approval from the Bioethics Commission, USAMVB, no. 14 / 17.06.2020

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Overall, the survey was well received by students, who were eager to express their opinions on communication. However, there were skeptical students who, even though they filled out the questionnaire, did not see its point. One of the student respondents said “*Since it*

is the end of the student period, now it does not matter anymore". For teachers, most of them agreed to provide answers, although 3 colleagues refused to fill in the questionnaire specifically stating that they were not interested in the topic. These negative attitudes alone provide proof of the need to develop the communication culture of those involved in teaching.

We present a summary of responses, by category of participant, for each individual question.

Question 1. How important is communication in your student / teacher life?

Table 1.

Answers related to the importance of communication in the student / teacher life

	Students 1st year	Students 3rd year	Students 6th year	Teachers	Total respondents
Very important, important, essential, vital	49 (94%)	37 (84%)	32 (82%)	24 (100%)	142 (89%)
Pretty important	3 (6%)	5 (11%)	6 (15%)	0	14 (9%)
Not quite important	0	2 (5%)	1 (3%)	0	3 (2%)
Total	52	44	39	24	159 (100%)

Although all teachers, regardless of age group, agreed on the importance of communication in their life, there were other opinions among students. Thus, communication was considered very important for 94% of the 1st year students, for 84% of the 3rd year students and for 82% of the 6th year students. The lower interest in communication of the students in the final year was also underlined by the remark of a respondent, who considered that "communication is no longer important, taking into account the end of the student period".

Question 2. Specific areas in which communication is used

For each group of subjects, one or more areas of communication were identified. First year students had found that communication is involved in the teaching process, in the area of administrative / informational relations, in their interaction with the colleagues, in social life and professional activities (15 students did not answer this question). 44% of the students referred to the communication in terms of social life and student to student communication and only 25% recognized the communication concept as part of the teaching process. For teachers, only 10 out of 24 identified the application of communication in the teaching process, while 13 (54%) did not identify any area at all. Table 2 shows the summarized responses per group of respondents.

Table 2.

Areas of application of communication by students and teachers

Areas of communication	1 st year students (52)	3 rd year students (44)	6 th year students (39)	Under 45 year old (10 teachers)	Over 45 year old (14 teachers)
Teaching process	8	10	16	4	6
Administrative / informational	4	0	4	0	0
Colleagues / social life	27	15	17	0	1
Veterinarian profession	3	4	10	0	3
No area identified	15	19	9	6	7

As mentioned, we chose a questionnaire with open questions to give respondents the freedom to express their views. Thus, some students wrote about the feeling of fear of communicating in some situations in order to avoid unwanted reactions of some teachers. One of the student respondents said *“I consider communication very important but personally, I don’t think I communicate well especially with the teachers. I am personally afraid sometimes to communicate with certain teachers”*. Of course, this issue has two components: on the one hand, the increased sensitivity and lack of courage of some students, on the other hand, the overreactions of some teachers. From the other perspective, a teacher respondent said *“Basically, the activity of teacher is in itself communication. Being a teacher means first of all communicating, transmitting your professional experience, but from time to time, you also have to give life advice, to communicate impressions, things that have marked you”*. Another communication problem was the failure to provide administrative information in a timely manner.

Another observation relates to some in the 6th year student group (9 of 39) not identifying an area of communication, not because areas do not exist but because of a feeling that *“the current study is useless.”* However, in all groups of students there were individuals who did not identify or did not want to identify areas where communication is used.

For teachers, only 10 out of 24 identified the application of communication in the teaching process, while 13 (54%) did not identify any area at all.

After analyzing the first two questions one can begin to draw a picture of the perception of communication among the two categories of respondents. There is an obvious lack of some of the basic knowledge of communication, a misunderstanding of the role of the two parties involved, the addresser and the addressee. Teachers did not always identify the academic process of teaching as an act of communication through which they pass on to students knowledge and vital experiences of their future profession. Similarly, the students did not identify the academic process of teaching as being underpinned by communication, when they receive messages that they should decode, understand and integrate at a conceptual level.

The various functions of language were also poorly understood by the respondents. For example, the cognitive function, through which the process of objective knowledge is achieved by using the generalization and abstraction, was hardly recognized in the dynamics of communication – as part of the academic act of teaching.

Question 3. Can you give some examples of types of communication?

Most respondents listed one or more types of communication, even though they were not aware of the specific types of communication as categorised in Table 3. Most respondents identified direct / verbal communication (86%) and indirect / non-verbal communication (58%). In some instances, the same type of communication could be classified under two categories (written communication and technology-mediated communication that can also be written).

Table 3.

Types of communication identified

Types of communication	1 st year (52 students)	3 rd year (44 students)	6 th year (39 students)	Under 45 year old (10 teachers)	Over 45 year old (14 teachers)	Total 159 respondents
Direct / verbal	43	40	34	10	10	137 (86%)
Indirect / non-verbal / gesture, attitude	33	23	23	7	6	92 (58%)
Paraverbal	5	1	2	3	0	11 (7%)
Written (not specified whether it also refers to the technology-mediated category)	11	15	11	4	5	46 (29%)
Technology-mediated	5	7	6	1	6	25 (16%)
Through social networking / group communication	1	5	6	0	4	16 (10%)
Interactive	1	0	0	1	0	2 (1%)
Formal	0	0	1	0	0	1 (0.6%)
Informal	0	0	1	0	0	1 (0.6%)
With colleagues	7	0	4	0	0	11 (7%)
Unilateral	0	0	0	1	2	3 (2%)
Bilateral	0	0	0	1	0	1 (0.6%)
Teacher – student	4	0	0	0	0	4 (2.5%)
Student – animal	1	0	0	0	0	1 (0.6%)
Veterinarian – owner	0	0	1	0	0	1 (0.6%)
Superficial	1	0	0	0	0	1 (0.6%)
No answer / I do not know	5	3	2	0	1	11 (7%)

The types of communication can be classified according to several criteria (13), but an important issue for our study is that the respondents have a limited understanding of the notions of intrapersonal, interpersonal, small group, public or mass communication. Also, in the university system, within the teaching and learning process verbal communication is emphasized as the basis of lectures and written communication as the basis of the didactic material provided to the students. Students do not recognize didactic materials as a form of communication, while teachers do not seem to realize that each lecture is an act of communication, during which information is delivered that should reach the students as accurately as possible, who in turn should decode it.

Question 4. What is your opinion about the communication between teachers and students in our faculty?

This question was asked to identify specific aspects of the culture of communication in the faculty, taking into account the level of knowledge about communication. The results summary in Table 4 shows the need for communication training for both groups of subjects.

Table 4.

How communication between teachers and students is perceived

Quality of communication between teachers and students	1 st year (52 students)	3 rd year (44 students)	6 th year (39 students)	Under 45 year old (10 teachers)	Over 45 year old (14 teachers)	Total 159 respondents
Very important / important	10	0	0	0	0	10 (6%)
Very good / good, open, effective communication	19	9	0	3	3	34 (21%)
Average level of communication, needs improvement	11	7	7	5	6	36 (23%)
Poor communication / Low quality / Ineffective / Dreadful communication	8	6	11	0	4	29 (18%)
Opinions in both directions (some teachers have good communication, others poor)	6	14	11	3	2	36 (23%)
It is unidirectional	1	0	0	0	0	1 (0.6%)
No specific answer	10	4	7	2	1	24 (15%)
There is no communication	0	1	3	0	0	4 (2.5%)

Most respondents highlighted the need for some improvement in communication between teachers and students. Thus, 23% of all respondents perceived the level of communication as average and 23% noted that there were different levels of communication

skills depending on the individual. These two points of view were mentioned by all groups of respondent.

The opinion that communication was at a very good / good / open / effective level ranks second (21%). An interesting observation is the decreasing trend in the student responses to this option (one third of respondents in the 1st year, one fifth of respondents in the 3rd year, and one respondent in the 6th year).

The communication was considered poor / low quality / ineffective by 18% of respondents, the degree of dissatisfaction increasing as students reach the end of their studies. Note that no teacher under the age of 45 chose this answer.

Although not directly linked to the question, some of the respondents made additional comments, which may be subject to discussion. Students highlighted certain behaviors of teachers that do not meet expectations, especially the issue of lack of respect and empathy. On the other hand, some teachers recognized their lack of skills and training in certain areas of communication, for example, the management of conflicts that may arise during a teaching activity.

Both teachers and students have information gaps and deficiencies in understanding the concept of communication, these results merely confirm the natural consequence, namely less effective communication. The absence of feedback in the student-teacher relationship will generate a gap in communication. Teachers encounter difficulties in encoding and transmitting a message, and students face difficulties in the decoding phase. If, for example, the teacher's attitude to communication conveys an expectation that the student should already understand, then this will create a 'blocking' of communication in its first stage and makes feedback impossible.

Overall, many responses were emotionally charged, the regulatory function of language being highlighted. Students mentioned both formal communication, the quality of the academic act of teaching, message quality and efficiency, as well as non-formal communication. Apparently, the groups do not differentiate between these two types of communication (formal and non-formal), the appreciation of the academic act of teaching being influenced by teachers' personality and approach. Even teachers do not seem to recognize the possibility that attitudes and approaches that lack tact and professionalism may be obstacles to the communication process.

Being a relatively small community whose members are frequently interacting and whose performance is based on the quality of this interaction, clearly outlines the need that besides academic communication, human interactions should be reviewed for their quality, both within the activity period and in "non-formal" moments (e.g. lectures breaks, outside of classes, any dialogue initiated by one of the parties). The teacher / student relationship is one of power, mentor / disciple, and it is very likely that some attitudes and reactions from the power side will be perceived by the students as unfair, abusive or inappropriate, just as some attitudes on the disciples side are perceived as rebellious and questioning by the teacher (power). The classical generation gap emerges, which, once apparent, only complicates and diverts the academic

communication from its noble purpose of passing on knowledge and experience to the next generation.

We are aware that the limited number of respondents may not fully reflect reality, but on the basis of the answers received, the need for awareness and improvement of communication in veterinary medical education is outlined.

Question 5. What kind of communication influences students' performances?

An indicator of the quality of the teaching-learning act is also represented by the students' performances. We tried to identify which type of communication is perceived as more important, having a good or a bad influence on students' performances (Table 5).

Table 5.

Types of communication identified as influencing students' performances

Types of communication that influence students' performances	1st year (52 students)	3rd year (44 students)	6th year (39 students)	Under 45 year old (10 teachers)	Over 45 year old (14 teachers)	Total 159 respondents
Direct / verbal	36	39	23	7	7	112 (70%)
Indirect / non-verbal / gesture, attitude	4	1	6	1	2	14 (9%)
Paraverbal	0	0	0	1	1	2 (1%)
Written (not specified whether it also refers to the technology-mediated category)	2	3	3	0	1	9 (6%)
Technology-mediated	1	2	8	1	2	14 (9%)
Customized	0	0	0	1	0	1 (0.6%)
Interactive	0	0	7	0	5	12 (8%)
With colleagues: student - student	3	1	2	0	0	6 (4%)
Teacher - student	10	1	2	0	0	13 (8%)
Veterinarian / student - owner	0	0	1	0	0	1 (0.6%)
Empathetic	2	0	0	0	1	3 (2%)
Any type / all types of communication	2	3	3	2	0	10 (6%)
Personal example	0	0	0	0	1	1 (0.6%)
Tracking feedback from students	0	0	0	0	1	1 (0.6%)
No specific answer / no answer / I do not know	7	2	1	0	1	11 (7%)
There is no communication	1	0	0	0	0	1 (0.6%)

The most important type of communication that influences student performance is direct / verbal one (70% of respondents). All other types of communication were mentioned by less than 10% of respondents. Some student comments highlighted the need and the desire of the students for a friendly, empathetic environment in which the didactic activities take place.

We note that the results obtained by the students at the final examination, the one that certifies competences and skills in the field, is not primarily an indicator of the effectiveness of the teacher / student communication. This does not exclude the influence of the quality of communication - the more effective communication is, the more likely students leave the lecture hall with more knowledge on a particular topic and the more students will learn from the veterinarian in the clinic. However, the individual student's study time and selection of study material are likely to have a significantly greater effect on the results obtained in exams.

There is yet another need emerging in the teacher / student relationship, the one for direct, verbal communication. Since most courses are lecture-based when students can ask questions, their main response (identified by 70%) that direct, verbal communication has the greatest influence on their performance may explain the lack of feedback. Students are generally reluctant to raise their concerns and in many cases teachers have an attitude that discourages an open and sincere dialogue, an attitude designed to ensure the balance of power. The student's answer is motivated by the fact that he / she is more likely to find useful information without initiating an active dialogue with a teacher. The teacher can conclude in turn that the lack of questions from the students indicates that effective communication has occurred, or worse represents a lack of interest, not at any moment questioning the quality of the academic act of teaching, or of the communication process.

Question 6. Would you find it useful to learn more about communication methods?

The last question is the very essence of this study. Our purpose is to find out to what extent the need for training in communication is acknowledged by the students and by the teaching staff (Table 6).

Table 6.

Need for communication training

It is useful to learn more about communication	1st year (52 students)	3rd year (44 students)	6th year (39 students)	Under 45 year old teachers (10)	Over 45 year old teachers (14)	Total 159 respondents
Yes	46	39	34	10	13	142 (89%)
No	1	4	0	0	0	5 (3%)
No answer	3	0	1	0	0	4 (2.5%)
Communication is learned by communicating	2	0	0	0	0	2 (1%)
I know the methods of communication	0	1	2	0	0	3 (2%)
I do not care	0	0	1	0	0	1 (0.6%)
It would be nice but not useful	0	0	1	0	0	1 (0.6%)
It depends on the education	0	0	0	0	1	1 (0.6%)

The desire for training in communication and recognition of the usefulness, at least as an intention, is highlighted by 89% of respondents and only 3% categorically refuted the need. Student comments included possible reasons underlying the desire to learn about communicating with teachers and overcoming certain barriers / obstacles related to age and education. One of the student respondents said *“It would be useful to organize more joint interaction activities between students and teachers that would strengthen relationships and create more comfortable conditions for communication”*, and it was confirmed also by a teacher who said that training in communication is *“More than useful, it is very necessary”*.

As indicated in Table 4, only 21% of respondents considered that the quality of communication was very good, the need for more knowledge in this area is self evident. More training in communication is required to improve knowledge and awareness of the concept of communication and all its component parts. It is imperative that each actor involved understands the influence of their own role in, and influence upon, the quality of the academic act of teaching; equally important are the adjustment of people-to-people relationships in the community, the natural and harmonious balance of the power ratio and the leveling of the differences in communication.

In view of the conclusions drawn from the analysis of the questions, the shortcomings in the knowledge and understanding of communication, and the needs outlined, and taking into account the results of other scientific studies in the field, we suggest the introduction of similar methods of training to improve communication skills. Thus, some studies have highlighted the high level of communication skills of practitioners and the need for lifelong training in areas of

communication that are different to those established in human medicine (i.e. selling services, communicating about euthanasia) (9, 10).

Many authors emphasize the difficulties of implementing innovative teaching methods into an existing curriculum, and of correlating the teaching with the skills needed by a veterinarian adapted to the globalization process. Traditional teaching methods based on lectures are no longer the most effective for the current student generation and it is recognized that there is a need to support and encourage teachers, particularly in institutional approaches to professional development and training in communication skills (3, 10, 14, 16).

As a first step in developing the culture of the concept of communication, we suggest initiating a series of workshops in which the parties involved in the academic process consolidate their knowledge about communication, learn techniques and methods of efficiency, illustrated by specially designed exercises. Additionally, everyone (teacher and student) needs to ensure their knowledge and use of technology is up to date. Teachers need to update their material in terms of the quality of the information presented, but also of the presentations layout in order to be able to facilitate understanding by a generation raised in a very different world (the generation of digital natives). Therefore, students need to be helped and trained to achieve an increased efficiency in their learning process.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Communication within the teacher-student relationship was recognized as very important by 100% of the teaching staff and 88% of the students.
2. From the analysis of the responses, there is a need for increased knowledge and greater awareness of perception of communication amongst all stakeholder groups: students, teachers and veterinarians.
3. To increase the quality of the educational act and the professional performance of students and graduates, it is necessary to train teachers and students in the field of communication. As a result the graduates will acquire specific communication skills, indispensable to their professional lives as veterinarians.

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